

Marshall Memo 293

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 6, 2009

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Quotes of the Week

“Some of the most successful teachers are some of the least charismatic... But they have a gift of figuring out what motivates people.”

Wendy Kopp (see item #4)

“Data can make problems more visible, but only people can solve them.”

Jolley Bruce Christman, Ruth Curran Neild, Katrina Bulkley, Suzanne Blanc, Roseann Liu, Cecily Mitchell, and Eva Travers (see item #1)

“Lacking the capacity for open discussion, [practitioners] cannot arrive at a shared diagnosis. Lacking a shared diagnosis, they cannot craft a common vision of the future state or a coherent intervention strategy that successfully negotiates the difficult problems organizational change poses. In short, the low level of competence in most organizations in fashioning an inquiring dialogue inhibits identifying root causes and developing fundamental system solutions.”

Beer and Eisenstat (quoted in item #1)

“I thought I’d taught it well, and I hadn’t. I needed to look at how I could do things differently.”

A teacher looking at interim assessment results, quoted in “A Work in Progress” by Julia Steiny in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30. #3, p. 22)

“You can’t lead from afar.”

A central-office administrator quoted in “Medical Residency Model Goes to School” by Beth Boatright et al., *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30. #3, p. 22)

1. Examining the Use of Interim Assessments in Philadelphia

In this thoughtful 80-page report, a team of researchers led by Jolley Bruce Christman examines the implementation of interim assessments (a.k.a. benchmarks) in Philadelphia, focusing on 2005-2007. Interim assessments have been part of Philadelphia's improvement strategy since 2003, when new grade-by-grade learning expectations were introduced under then-superintendent Paul Vallas. The idea was to give teachers and school leaders data on how well students were learning at four points during the year so there could be immediate follow-up in areas where students weren't proficient.

Unlike many districts using interim assessments, Philadelphia has linked its tests closely to curriculum objectives and the required instructional sequence (each test covers what has been taught in the previous five weeks), appears to have been successful at getting rapid turnaround of student results by having most students take the assessments online, and builds in a re-teaching week after each cycle. Princeton Review has been Philadelphia's interim assessment vendor, and teachers and principals can get their test results from a "Schoolnet" database by logging in and pulling down individual student and class reports, which include wrong-answer analysis.

Philadelphia made substantial gains in student achievement from 2002 to 2008: Grade 3-8 combined reading scores on Pennsylvania state tests went from 22.6% proficient and above to 47.1% and math from 18.6% to 52.6%. However, a number of factors were involved in these gains, and the report suggests that the interim assessments played a significant role in only some classrooms and schools (see below). In addition, a 2005 Phi Delta Kappa International analysis of the city's new curriculum and tests found that they focused mostly on knowledge and comprehension and did not sufficiently address rigorous, higher-order standards.

The researchers report that Philadelphia teachers responded very positively to the interim assessments – but there was no correlation between teachers' positive feelings and their students' achievement gains. What *did* correlate with student gains was (a) school leaders knowing the curriculum, the interim assessments, and state standards and getting teacher teams to focus on results, (b) teachers taking collective responsibility for using interim assessment data to improve instruction and help struggling students, and (c) aligning instruction with the district's learning objectives (which were, in turn, aligned with the interim assessments). In other words, the key was moving beyond an individual teacher logging in and getting his or her classroom data. Instead, it took getting same-grade teacher teams to meet, analyze the results of each interim assessment to understand what concepts in the curriculum were posing difficulty for students, share ideas, figure out the best interventions, and actually follow up in their classrooms.

The researchers were intrigued with teacher team organizational dynamics and observed many Philadelphia team meetings to get a sense of how well a “cycle of inquiry” was operating – teachers analyzing interim assessment results, trying different approaches in their classrooms, and seeing what worked. They conclude, “Our data indicate that the quality of practitioners’ sense-making determines the quality of the actions that they take based on the data. This finding offers insight into why the survey measure – teacher satisfaction with Benchmarks – was not a predictor of gains in student achievement. If practitioners focus only on superficial problems – described as ‘the low-hanging fruit’ by principals in our study – their intervention strategies are likely to be mundane.” The authors quote Beer and Eisenstat (1996) on the dynamics that must be present in teacher teams for discussions to get off the ground: “Lacking the capacity for open discussion, [practitioners] cannot arrive at a shared diagnosis. Lacking a shared diagnosis, they cannot craft a common vision of the future state or a coherent intervention strategy that successfully negotiates the difficult problems organizational change poses. In short, the low level of competence in most organizations in fashioning an inquiring dialogue inhibits identifying root causes and developing fundamental system solutions.”

The researchers found that there were a number of ways Philadelphia teacher teams used interim assessment results, ranging from low-level to high-level and implemented with varying degrees of skill. These included:

- *Identifying “bubble” students* who were likely to move from Basic to Proficient or Below Basic to Basic on state tests and targeting them for special interventions (tutoring, help from a reading or math specialist, computer-assisted programs, extended day programs, Saturday school) so the school would make AYP.

- *Motivating teachers to work harder and smarter* (“You can do it!”). The researchers found that principals using this approach sometimes failed to get into the actual assessment data to figure out specifically what needed to be fixed.

- *Getting insights into students’ inability to perform well in testing situations.* Teachers sometimes realized that the reason their students seemed to be doing well in class but performed poorly on “official” tests was that kids were getting too much help and scaffolding in the classroom and couldn’t do without it. This led teachers to create more independent learning experiences during regular instruction and challenge students to think more on their own.

- *Identifying skills and concepts to be re-taught* in the sixth week of the instructional cycle or in subsequent units. The key question was whether material was taught using the same approach or whether teachers, seeing that what they had done before hadn’t worked, used a new approach.

- *Identifying students who shared similar weaknesses* (or strengths) for re-grouping to provide differentiated instruction, either within individual classes or between classes.

- *Getting students involved in helping each other.* A few teachers paired high-achieving with low-achieving students and stressed collective responsibility for pulling up the class’s achievement.

• *Identifying content and pedagogical needs for on-the-spot coaching and formal professional development.* In one school, the principal modeled a more effective practice and then focused on it during classroom visits for an entire week.

The researchers focused on one school that did an exemplary job using interim assessment results and made extraordinary gains in student achievement, moving from most students scoring Below Basic to more than 80 percent of students scoring Proficient or Advanced in math and 60-70 percent scoring Proficient or Advanced in reading. Here is what this school did:

- The principal emphasized the importance of using interim assessment results to inform instruction and get students to high levels of achievement;
- The principal scheduled grade-level teacher team meetings as part of the weekly routine;
- The principal attended grade-level data meetings and expected teachers to come to the meetings prepared and to participate actively;
- Teacher team meetings were structured (agenda, guiding questions, summarizing by the principal at the end with emphasis on next steps) and delved into instructional substance.
- Math and reading lead teachers (released from the classroom full time) were well-versed in state standards and tests, the Philadelphia curriculum, and the interim assessments and worked actively with the principal and with teachers in team meetings and classrooms to put the data to work;
- The principal worked closely with teacher leaders to develop long-term improvement strategies and short-term priorities for classrooms and spread effective practices across the school.

The stellar work in this and a few other schools notwithstanding, the researchers found that in general, the interim assessments were used broadly but not deeply; there was too much attention to the “bubble” students and not enough on deeper analysis of the data and follow-up for all students. In short, Philadelphia schools missed many opportunities to use interim assessment data effectively. “Data can make problems more visible,” say Christman and her colleagues, “but only people can solve them.”

A concept test: Click on the report (see link below) and look at the photograph on the cover. If this were a typical interim assessment data meeting (which perhaps it isn’t), what’s missing? How could you predict that this team would not get robust student achievement gains as the result of its data meeting?

“Making the Most of Interim Assessment Data: Lessons from Philadelphia” by Jolley Bruce Christman, Ruth Curran Neild, Katrina Bulkley, Suzanne Blanc, Roseann Liu, Cecily Mitchell, and Eva Travers, June 2009, Research for Action,
http://pdf.researchforaction.org/rfapdf/publication/pdf_file/558/Christman_J_Making_the_Most_of_Interim_Assessment_Data.pdf

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2. Strategies for Supporting Four Types of Teachers

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, California curriculum administrator Gary Waddell sorts teachers into four categories according to their degree of content/pedagogy mastery and student focus and offers professional development advice for each type:

- *The master teacher*: strong student focus, strong content/pedagogy mastery – Many administrators fall into the trap of leaving master teachers alone, but this is self-defeating, says Waddell. “Providing intentional, targeted support to master teachers contributes significantly to a school climate in which the standard of performance is high. Such support is also motivating to lower-performing teachers.” Master teachers are hungry for feedback and usually make excellent use of feedback and professional development. They need meeting structures in which they can connect with high-performing colleagues and share their “secret sauce” with others. Master teachers also need support for professional reflection, since they tend to be overly critical of themselves.

- *The technician*: weak student focus, strong content/pedagogy mastery – These teachers tend to be traditionalists, are seriously and dogmatically focused on academic rigor, and produce results – but not for all students. Their classrooms can be cold, businesslike, and impersonal, lacking culturally relevant content. “They benefit from work designed to address their often tenuous understanding of equity and the lived experience of their students as individuals with unique racial and cultural backgrounds,” says Waddell. They need to learn about student motivation and engagement; one strategy is to have them do an in-depth analysis of one struggling student, interviewing him or her, learning important details, looking at progress or lack thereof, and designing specific interventions. This would also help a technician become more skilled at differentiating instruction. Technicians would benefit from being coached by a master teacher.

- *The caretaker*: strong student focus, weak content/pedagogy mastery – These teachers are nurturers, placing students’ well-being above all else. They are good at boosting students’ self-esteem and attitude toward school, and often form lasting bonds with students. “What limits caretakers,” says Waddell, “is their failure to connect their strong student focus with equally strong academic rigor.” Caretakers don’t lack *will*; they just need professional development to boost their *skill* in content standards, instructional methodology, curriculum planning, differentiation, and specific classroom moves that produce student academic success.

- *The struggler*: weak student focus, weak content/pedagogy mastery – “The potential for struggling teachers to do more damage than good is tremendous,” says Waddell. Problems in their classrooms are a drain on administrators’ time and detract from the overall work of the school. Parents may request that their children not be placed in their classes, and student achievement is often low. Administrators must avoid the tendency to spend too much time with these teachers, says Waddell. “The support offered to struggling teachers must be targeted, explicit and focused. Professional learning should be coupled with accountability to measure progress.”

“Who’s That Teacher? Matrix Shows How to Support Teachers at Different Levels” by Gary Waddell in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #3, p. 10-16) no e-link; Waddell can be reached at gary.waddell@mac.com.

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3. Having Real Conversations

In the first of an upcoming series of *Journal of Staff Development* columns, author Susan Scott says “If you want to become a great teacher, a great leader, gain the capacity to connect with students and colleagues at a deep level... Your most valuable currency is relationships, emotional capital. You may have smarts galore, but without emotional capital, your great plans, dreams, and strategies will stall.” She quotes Albert Einstein to back up her point: “We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead; it can only serve.”

And what are relationships made of? Conversations. Scott urges us to take human connections one conversation at a time. We should resolve that “I will come out from behind myself, into each conversation I have, and make it real.”

The problem, says Scott, is that we go through life leaving too much unsaid. “[O]ne of the greatest obstacles to our individual and collective success and happiness are very likely the conversations we simply didn’t have, the ones we’ve avoided for weeks, months, or years.” We need more “fierce” conversations, by which she means conversations that build collaboration with peers, school leaders, and parents and get the best for our students. We can do this by:

- Interrogating reality in order to...
- Provoke learning so that we may...
- Tackle our toughest challenges and in the process...
- Enrich relationships.

“If we want to get it right for all of us, rather than be right, we will clarify our perspective and the reasons for it,” says Scott. “We will invite pushback, really invite it, versus going through the motions, in the genuine hope that we will be different when the conversation is over, that we will have been influenced. People with this mind-set and skill set are rare creatures who enrich relationships and acquire emotional capital every day and whose presence at meetings is actively sought and valued.”

“How Conversations Can Change Educators’ and Students’ Lives” by Susan Scott in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #3, p. 53-54), no e-link; Scott can be reached at susan@fierceinc.com

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4. Wendy Kopp on Finding Good Teachers and Dumping Strategic Planning

In this *New York Times* interview by Adam Bryant, Teach for America founder and chief executive Wendy Kopp speaks about what she looks for in teachers, what she decided about strategic planning, and how she manages priorities. Some excerpts:

- “Some of the most successful teachers are some of the least charismatic,” says Kopp. “But they have a gift of figuring out what motivates people.”

- When hiring teachers, says Kopp, “The most predictive trait is still past demonstrated achievement, and all selection research basically points to that.” That said, we should look for perseverance, internal locus of control, and remaining optimistic in the face of difficult challenges. Confronted with a problem, people with these traits figure out what they can control and own it, rather than blaming outside forces.

- Kopp says she has lost faith in the process of strategic planning. The mission of Teach for America is simple: working toward getting all children an excellent education. But, she says, “At one point, I also had this revelation that we were no longer going to go through all this central development of strategic plans. I don’t know how many years we did that until I said, ‘Forget it. We don’t even need to do this anymore. Let’s figure out our priorities and how we are going to measure our success. And then we’re going to let people run after those goals.’ And that just freed up a lot of energy.”

- Kopp says that she is “obsessive” about spending an hour once a week thinking about what she needs to do to move her priorities forward, and then spending ten minutes each day thinking, “O.K., so based on the priorities for the week, how am I going to prioritize my day tomorrow?” This, she says, is the key to not slipping into a reactive mode.

“Charisma? To Her, It’s Overrated” An interview with Wendy Kopp by Adam Bryant in the *New York Times*, July 5, 2009,
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/business/05corner.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Charisma?%20To%20Her,%20It's%20Overrated&st=Search

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5. Getting the Most Out of Every Professional Development Dollar

In this *Journal of Staff Development* column, NSDC director Stephanie Hirsh suggests twelve ways to continue high-quality professional development despite lean budgets:

- Make student learning results the focus of professional learning; provide principals and teacher teams with timely interim assessment data to work with.
- Give teachers the support they need to address student needs identified in these assessments.
- Use time during the school day (or in early-dismissal or late-start time slots) for teacher teams to plan lessons and units, write common assessments, and learn together.
- Invest only in proven strategies and eliminate funding for one-shot workshops, unrelated graduate courses, one-size-fits-all conferences, beginning-of-the-year districtwide pep rallies, and “cafeteria” staff development days. “This is not a time to experiment with this year’s new thing,” says Hirsh.
- Require teachers who participate in intensive school-based or district-sponsored initiatives to commit to learning, application, and assessing student results.

- Tap the expertise and credibility of in-house experts, including teachers, coaches, and others who have a track record of success with student learning.
- Support teacher teams to form subject-specific networks to spread best practices, giving flex-time, recognition, and non-monetary incentives.
- Take advantage of free resources from state departments of education, regional education service organizations, and other agencies.
- Pool resources and collaborate with neighboring schools and districts.
- Encourage teachers to use the Internet to access free lesson plans, unit plans, and curriculum materials.
- Get teachers reading about best practices in voluntary journal and book study groups.
- Learn from successful classrooms, schools, and districts. “Within every school, there are teachers who are getting better results than other teachers on their grade level or subject area,” says Hirsh. “Spend time investigating the secrets to their success and determine what is transportable to other classes.”

“Rich Learning Opportunities in a Tough Economy” by Stephanie Hirsh in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #3, p. 57-58), no e-link; Hirsh can be reached at stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org.

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6. Is There Such a Thing as Foreign Language Learning Disability?

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, College of Mount Saint Joseph professor Richard Sparks makes an impassioned case against there being a unique “disability” for learning a foreign language. *Foreign language learning disability* (FLLD) has become a popular term in the learning disabilities and foreign language literature, says Sparks, but there is no empirical evidence that it exists. In particular, the usual LD approach of looking for an IQ/achievement discrepancy has “no value in predicting whether a student will have foreign language learning problems,” says Sparks, and cites several other spurious ways of determining that students are uniquely disabled when it comes to learning a foreign language.

Rather, students are spread out along a continuum from very strong to very weak foreign language learners, and those at the weaker end should not be assumed to have FLLD (or automatically given waivers or course substitutions for foreign language requirements). Sparks believes that foreign language educators should put aside the FLLD concept, not pay too much attention to the confusing messages emanating from the special education community, look at each student without preconceptions, and focus on developing the most effective instructional approaches for students who have difficulty learning a foreign language.

At the end of his article, Sparks quotes Yogi Berra – “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll wind up someplace else,” – and concludes, “For years, the LD field has not known where it is going because it failed to follow the path of research evidence that would have established an empirically valid definition and diagnostic criteria for the LD concept. As a result, the field has wound up somewhere else enmeshed in politics, ideology, and

pseudoscience. Foreign language educators and researchers should learn from the mistakes of the LD field by avoiding the label of ‘disability’ for students who struggle with foreign language learning and using valid and reliable evidence to determine how best to identify and teach at-risk foreign language learners.”

“If You Don’t Know Where You’re Going, You’ll Wind Up Somewhere Else: The Case of ‘Foreign Language Disability’” by Richard Sparks in *Foreign Language Annals*, Spring 2009 (Vol. 42, #1, p. 7-26), no e-link available

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7. Unregulated, Pernicious Sex Education

In this commentary in *Research and Action Report*, Wellesley Centers for Women scholar Jean Kilbourne writes, “the United States remains the only developed nation that doesn’t teach comprehensive sex education in its schools. What many people don’t realize is that our children are getting massive doses of sex education – from the commercial culture. And they learn very harmful attitudes about sex and their own sexuality. They learn that sex is the defining activity in relationships, to the exclusion of love and friendship. They learn that sex is often linked to violence (an obviously dangerous and disturbing connection). And they learn to associate physical appearance and buying the right products not only with being sexy but also with being successful as a person. Such messages can shape their sexual attitudes and behavior, values, and their capacity for love, connection, and healthy relationships well into adulthood. Although the sexual sell is at a fever pitch throughout all forms of the media, depictions of sex as an important and potentially profound human activity are notably absent.”

“So Sexy So Soon” by Jean Kilbourne in *Research and Action Report*, Wellesley Centers for Women, Spring/Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #2, p. 12-13)

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8. A Protocol for Small-Group Discussion of a Text

This protocol from the National School Reform Faculty is designed to help small groups of professionals discuss an article or book chapter. Here are the recommended steps:

- Sit in a circle.
- Identify a facilitator/timekeeper.
- If participants haven’t done so already, give everyone a chance to read the text and highlight passages (and a couple of back-ups) that they believe have implications for their work.
- Begin the first round by having one person read a passage aloud, comment on what it means to them and how it connects to past experiences, etc., and talk about its implications (three minutes).
- The rest of the group responds (two minutes).
- Each remaining member of the group reads and talks about a chosen passage and the group responds each time.

- There can be one to three rounds, and then the group debriefs.

“Three Levels of Text Protocol”, National School Reform Faculty (2008), in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #3, p. 56 <http://www.nsrffharmony.org>)

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9. Short Items:

a. An online arts education handbook – This website is a free handbook synthesizing research on arts education across the U.S. It has a database of 50 arts learning communities and advice on how to establish, grow, and sustain a learning community to improve arts education. Check it out at <http://handbook.laartsed.org/home/index.ashx>.

“From the Field” in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 30, #3, p. 64). The handbook is entitled *Designing the Arts Learning Community: A Handbook for K-12 Professional Development Planners* by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the San Francisco Arts Commission, and the Santa Clara County Office of Education, November 2008

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b. TWIPs – In this *Essential Teacher* article, Debbie Zacarian uses a nice acronym for the kinds of words teachers might think about putting on a math (or other content-area) word wall – words students need to know to be successful in your content area:

TWIP:

- Terms
- Words
- Idioms
- Phrases

“Displaying Word Walls Is More Than Displaying Words” by Debbie Zacarian in *Essential Teacher*, June 2009 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 9-10), no e-link; Zacarian can be reached at dzacarian@collaborative.org.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

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- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal